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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 QUEBEC 000046

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/11/2015

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SUBJECT: QUEBEC IMMIGRATION POLICY AT A CROSSROADS?

REF: A. 03 MONTREAL 453

[1](#)B. 01 QUEBEC 111
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[1](#)D. 94 MONTREAL 976

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(U) SUMMARY: Quebec views its semi-autonomous immigration policy as a key instrument in maintaining its economy and in preserving its francophone identity. But the province finds it hard to attract the kind of immigrants it wants and to retain those that it gets. Over just the past six years the Maghreb has become the deepest pool for the emigrant francophones that Quebec has traditionally sought to attract. But North Africans are prominent among the groups that have proven difficult to integrate into the Quebec labor market, and events since 9/11 have posed added challenges to their social integration even in this highly tolerant society.

2.(C) With Law 53, passed last summer, the Charest Government ostensibly broke over 15 years of bipartisan immigration policy by enabling Quebec to use geographic origin as one of the criteria in selecting immigrants, and, if needed, to suspend the processing of applications. Though never publicly stated, the measure was aimed primarily at the massive number of applications from Morocco and Algeria, which have created an enormous backlog and threaten to dominate future immigrant inflow. The opposition Parti Quebecois opposed Law 53 as discriminatory, and it is yet to be seen whether the Liberal Government will actually use the new tools it offers. The immigration issue in Quebec is usually on the back-burner, but when brought forward it uncovers not political choices, but rather contradictions in the values held by society as a whole.
End Summary.

Finding Future Quebecers

3.(U) Immigration is one of the few areas under concurrent Federal and Provincial jurisdiction under the Constitution Act of 1867, but Quebec is the only province to have seriously developed its capacity to influence the size and composition of its immigrant flow. The Federal Government sets national immigration objectives, establishes criteria for Family Unification immigrants and Refugees, handles admissions at Ports-of-Entry, and applies statutory immigrant visa criteria relating to criminality, security, and health. Ottawa consults with the provinces on most immigration policy and enters into agreements with them. But Ottawa's accord with Quebec is by far the most extensive. Under its most recent iteration (1991) Quebec sets its own immigration levels, establishes the financial criteria for sponsors, and runs the settlement and integration programs (partially funded by Ottawa). No immigrant can be settled in Quebec without a Quebec Certificate of Selection (CSQ).

4.(U) Quebec's most important tool has been its role in selecting "independent immigrants." Unlike Family Unification migrants and Refugees (which are the subject of ongoing Ottawa-Quebec negotiations to insure that these Federally-selected individuals can secure a CSQ), the selection of independent immigrants is a purely Quebec responsibility. These are the individuals that are the key to Quebec's immigration objectives. Quebec wants to select them on the basis of their anticipated economic and social contribution and adaptability to the province. And Quebec wants to increase both their numbers and their proportion of the province's total immigrant intake. For much of the 1990s these independent immigrants made up only about 40% of the inflow; in recent years their share has been deliberately increased to around 60%. The key tool in the screening/selection process is a qualifications assessment which awards a range of points for adaptability, experience (especially time already in Quebec), languages (especially French), age, spouse's characteristics, training, employment, and children. While Quebec immigration officials technically can use their judgment, most of the points are determined by resumes and credentials.

5.(U) There has been a consensus in Quebec on the need for immigration since the latter 1980s. Despite continuance of a high unemployment rate that had hitherto tended to restrict immigration, it came to be recognized that the sharp fall in the birth rate since the 1960s poses significant problems for the province's economy and social systems, as well as for the

survival of Quebec's distinct identity in a more populous Canada and North America. Quebec also hoped that targeted immigration would increase the overall skills, education, and capital of its population. In practice, it hasn't yet worked out that way. Quebec finds it hard to attract the kind of immigrants it wants and to retain those that it gets. The GOQ prioritizes investors and entrepreneurs, but gets far fewer applications than it wants (only about 10% of annual intake). Most immigrants are "workers" but Quebec finds itself capping its intake, because it does not want to admit more immigrants than it has employment vacancies. Immigrants with university and professionals degrees (which are admitted as "workers") have met resistance from Quebec associations and employers, and there are also legitimate concerns about the value of some foreign diplomas.

Structural Conundrums

6.(U) Quebec's immigration ambitions are also afflicted by a number of vicious circles. Immigration is often a spark to economic growth, but Quebec is economically less dynamic than some other provinces and consequently less attractive for Canada-bound migrants. Like comparable regions in rust-belt America, Quebec has found few replacements for old manufacturing and raw material extraction industries. Further, the province will soon be facing one of the more difficult demographic crises among Western societies, as its economically active population reaches retirement age, while the younger generations from four decades of low birth rates won't be numerous enough to pay the taxes and sustain consumption. Immigration alone won't solve this problem, as Quebec would have to double its current annual intake (to 80,000) just to stabilize the population. As Immigration Deputy Minister Raymonde Saint-Germain told us, Quebec's job market, housing stock, and social integration programs cannot handle that kind of volume even if the desired immigrants could be identified.

7.(U) The importance of the French language also poses problems for Quebec's immigrant flow. Over half of Quebec's immigrants are non-francophones in a province where French skills are vital to social integration and economic success. This is especially true outside of the Montreal region where jobs are going unfilled. Non-francophone immigrants also require significant public expenditures for language training and to provide family income while the training is going on. Moreover, it is not unusual for non-francophone immigrants, after an initial year or so in Quebec, to move to an English-speaking province. Consequently, French skills are strongly weighted in the qualifications assessment, francophone applicant pools are attractive recruiting targets, and francophone applicants have a decided advantage.

Maghrebian Immigration

8.(U) For most of the 1990s, a stagnant economy, budget worries, and preoccupations about integration kept immigration levels flat. But as the decade closed, things began to change, and in just the past few years immigration has sharply increased.

| (U) ANNUAL IMMIGRANTS TO QUEBEC (in thousands) | | | | | |
|--|------|------|-------|-------|------------|
| 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 |
| 27.2 | 29.8 | 27.7 | 26.5 | 29.2 | 32.5 |
| 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004* | 2005* | |
| 37.5 | 36.6 | 40.4 | 43.5 | 46.5 | *estimates |

9.(C) The intensification of civil conflict in Algeria in the late-1990s led to an increasing exodus of its more skilled and educated population. Word of the Quebec option spread, both among private individuals as well as lawyers and immigration agents. International social and economic conditions being what they are, the francophone populations of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia became the most fertile ground for would-be immigrants to Quebec. Unlike francophone black Africans (who could not always meet the skills qualifications) and francophone Europeans (few of whom wished to emigrate), there are significant numbers of Maghrebians who can score selection points for language, skills, education, children, and who also are seeking a new place to live. Applications increased sharply after 1999, and by 2003 over 70% of them were coming from North Africa, a volume which exceeded the overall Quebec immigration target.

10.(C) Civil servants who received these applications noted the growth of the Maghrebian share of applicants. They also were aware of significantly higher rates of unemployment and welfare support among Maghrebians (and black Africans), and found that in many cases, these applicants' French skills and school diplomas were over-rated. The Maghrebian increases also raised the prospect that their large families would likely come to dominate the future flow of Family Unification immigrants (about 20-25% of the total Quebec intake). Finally, after 9/11, security concerns made immigration officials more cautious in approving applications from the Islamic world. To balance this

flow, the Ministry stepped up recruitment efforts in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and, especially, Latin America, whose kindred languages promised more successful Francisation among a skilled immigrant pool, but modest success in these regions was dwarfed by the flood of applications from North Africa.

11.(C) In 2002, the Immigration Ministry moved the processing of Maghrebian applications (including the large number of pending files) from Paris to Montreal. Soon after the election of the Charest Government in April 2003, press reports began noting the slow processing times. And by the end of the year the Ministry faced a scandal when it was revealed that it had been processing approximately the same number of applications for each of the four major regions: Africa, Europe, Latin America, East Asia. The result was an enormous backlog of Maghrebians while the other queues were cleared.

Immigration Reform

12.(C) In 2004 the PLQ government sought to tackle the immigration challenge head-on with a new Action Plan for 2005-2007 and new legislation, Law 53. The Action Plan stressed the challenge of rapidly and successfully integrating needed immigrants, and proposed a broad range of measures aimed to address those problems. More succinctly, but no less directly, the Plan highlighted equity, integrity, efficiency, and transparency in processing, and the need to maintain diversity in the immigration inflow. Law 53 itself was a brief, eight-page document consisting of short passages modifying existing legislation. It reinforced the penalties for false documents, and gave the government powers to recognize and supervise immigration consultants. But the heart of Law 53 were its provisions to allow the government to do legally what it had been trying to do informally over the previous few years: suspend processing of pending immigration applications and set immigration targets according to geographic areas. Quebec, in effect, gave itself the tools to establish a quota (though the word is never used) for the Maghreb, and to channel its torrent of applications into a reservoir that might never be fully drained.

13.(C) Law 53 was promptly decried by both immigrant-rights groups and the opposition Parti Quebecois. Both attacked the law as discriminatory, and the PQ demanded to know how the immigration levels would be set and divided. But the law passed and the only question now is whether the Charest government will use the new tools provided by Law 53 to reduce the flow of immigration from the Maghreb. In October, the Under-Secretary for Immigration and her team went off to Morocco for ten days to assuage concerns and explain criteria and procedures. In a January conversation, then-Minister Courchene told us that she wanted to clear the backlog and increase the number of immigrants. And in a recent conversation with the CG, Deputy Minister Saint-Germain said that the GOQ will have to implement a processing schedule that is more transparent and predictable for the (fees-paying) applicant.

14.(C) At this point, neither privately nor publicly is there talk of suspending processing. The 2005 Immigration Plan, the first promulgated under Law 53 indicating geographic targets, anticipates no major change in the distribution of immigrants admitted. Indeed, it projects a rise in Maghrebians selected: 28% of the total, as compared with 18% in preceding years. (Given the backlog, even 28% is but a small percentage of applicants from that region. Media reports in mid-2004 indicated some 20,000 pending dossiers, the vast majority from Maghrebians.) The Plan numbers suggest that the GOQ recognizes it will have to proceed slowly and carefully in implementing its new quota system. And there is no sign of a decline of interest from North Africa.

(U) GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN OF IMMIGRANTS
(as percentages of Total Admitted)

| | '99 | '00 | '01 | '02 | '03* | '05* | |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|----|
| America, Cent & South | | 13 | 13 | 15 | 15 | 18 | 12 |
| Europe, N/W/S | 17 | 16 | 13 | 11 | 11 | 16 | |
| Europe, East | 9 | 8 | 9 | 14 | 12 | 14 | |
| Asia, East & SE | 18 | 16 | 17 | 13 | 14 | 13 | |
| Asia, South | 11 | 11 | 9 | 9 | 7 | | |
| Africa, North | 14 | 16 | 20 | 20 | 18 | 28 | |
| Africa, Other | 8 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 1 | |
| Middle East | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 6 | |
| Total Immigration (,000) | | | 29 | 32 | 38 | 38 | 40 |
| 37 | | | | | | | |

*2003 figures are estimates, 2005 figures are Selection Targets

Comment

15.(C) As in many Western societies, the immigration issue in Quebec is usually on the back-burner, but when brought forward it uncovers not political choices, but rather contradictions in the values held by society as a whole. The GOQ historically, and the current PLQ government, has generally taken a firm line on social integration. Three weeks ago, in a parliamentary forum (and in a subsequent letter to the press), International Affairs Minister (and one-time Immigration Minister) Gagnon-Tremblay noted the GOQ's opposition to the creation of Islamic family courts in Quebec, underlined the democratic and laic nature of Quebec society, and went on to remark that "immigrants who want to change our values can go elsewhere." But at the same time, Quebecers accept the need for immigration, recognize the difficulty in attracting immigrants, and place a high value on social tolerance. Any measures that can be interpreted as racist or profiling make prominent targets. After Gagnon-Tremblay's remarks, journalists promptly confronted newly-appointed Immigration Minister Lise Theriault, who reminded them of Quebec's (non-ideological) immigration selection criteria and rhetorically asked, "On what basis can one know if a candidate is a radical islamist?" A comparable situation exists on the security front. While the GOQ publicly emphasizes that Federal (not provincial) officials are responsible for immigrant security checks, senior Quebec immigration officials told us that they quietly forward the dossiers of applicants with suspected terrorist or criminal ties to the RCMP or the provincial police. END COMMENT.

FRIEDMAN